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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the shifts in literacy teaching and learning that occurred at a Melbourne primary school, one of twelve schools that took part in a large research project undertaken by staff at Deakin University funded by the Victorian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs: Middle Years Literacy Research Project. The project focused on literacy teaching, learning, and assessment of students in the middle years of schooling. Through close collaboration between the researcher and teachers at the school, significant changes were made to the language and literacy program. These changes reflected current language theory and extended the school's focus on independent learning to the area of literacy. The development of more authentic ways of assessing student learning grew out of the work in the project as teachers sought assessment practices that were consistent with their philosophy of teaching and learning. With a focus on developing authentic literacy practices, teachers developed new ways of tracking and reporting student achievement. (Author/RS)

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Shifting to more authentic language and literacy activity in the middle years

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we report on the shifts in literacy teaching and learning that occurred at a Melbourne primary school, one of twelve schools that took part in a large research project undertaken by staff at Deakin University funded by the Victorian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs: *Middle Years Literacy Research Project*. The project focused on literacy teaching, learning and assessment of students in the middle years of schooling. Through close collaboration between the researcher and teachers at the school, significant changes were made to the language and literacy program. These changes reflected current language theory and extended the school's focus on independent learning to the area of literacy. The development of more authentic ways of assessing student learning grew out of the work in the project as teachers sought assessment practices that were consistent with their philosophy of teaching and learning. With a focus on developing authentic literacy practices, teachers developed new ways of tracking and reporting student achievement.

Background to the study

The school described in this paper is a coeducational state primary school with approximately 400 students. It is located in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne in an area of high unemployment and social welfare support. Many of the children at the school are from single parent families and come from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds (there are 35-40 different racial groups). More than half the student population is from a non-English speaking background and more than 15% of students were born in other countries. There are significant numbers of children from Muslim backgrounds and small numbers of indigenous Australians and New Zealanders; no single racial group dominates the school. The school receives additional funds for students who speak a language other than English at home or are considered socially disadvantaged by prior educational experiences, family or other personal circumstances. This funding enables the school to provide support programs (with particular emphasis on literacy) to focus on students at risk of failing at school. More than half the students at the school qualify for the Educational Maintenance Allowance, a measure of economic disadvantage.

This school was selected for case study because of its progressive approach to teaching and learning. In 1997, it established structures for innovative teaching in the Grade 5 and 6 area (as well as other areas of the school) which it called an *Autonomous Learning Unit* (ALU). The school's approach was influenced by the work of Professor George Betts, an authority on the Autonomous Learner Model, an approach developed to meet the needs of gifted children. Central tenets of Betts' work are that teachers need to 'change the system,

not the child' and 'do things with children, not to them'. The aims of the ALU are to encourage student engagement in independent learning, provide for multiple intelligences, differentiate the curriculum to cater for individual learning needs and styles, heighten interaction among students, and develop lifelong learners. Students are encouraged to work autonomously, establish projects of personal meaning and purpose, and maintain more control of their learning than is generally available in a traditional classroom. In 2001, there are 110 students and five teachers in the ALU.

A critical incident three or four years ago prompted the establishment of the unit and a radical rethink of the way the school was educating its students. A gifted student, clearly unengaged in the work going on in the classroom, wandered out into the schoolyard several times a day. When asked why he would not remain in the classroom, he said he was bored. The principal and other teachers began questioning their approach, looking for alternatives to a teacher-dominated classroom (with the emphasis on factual knowledge) as a way to engage all students. Initially, extension programs were provided to students identified as gifted. The success of these programs highlighted the need for systemic change in the school. Students' engagement in the enrichment programs highlighted the inadequacy of the core program to cater for gifted students and showed new ways of individualising the curriculum and engaging all students. The result was the establishment of the ALU with am emphasis on all students working on open-ended tasks, engaging in problem solving and critical thinking, and using learning for authentic purposes. Students are generally in mixed ability and multi-age groups. They establish weekly goals in conferences with home group teachers, plan the next stages of their projects and negotiate work requirements. They are encouraged to develop in-depth

studies working alone or in groups. Teacher-led workshops are scheduled throughout the week to focus on language and numeracy skills needed by students to complete tasks undertaken in independent learning. Teachers grappled with ways of increasing student-directed activity to heighten the degree of control students had over their learning. While students were generally engaged in rich learning tasks, these were still largely defined by the teachers.

The study: development of authentic tasks in literacy

Discussion between the researcher and teachers centred on social critical language theory and the need to question the nature of literacy tasks going on in the ALU. Teachers were asked if they viewed literacy as a social practice and the extent to which students used literacy for real purposes, in meaningful contexts. A recent event provided the opportunity to locate this discussion in teachers' classroom practice. Students in the ALU had been asked to consider improvements to their school environment and write a letter to the principal outlining their views. The principal received over one hundred letters and discussed the inappropriateness of the task with teachers. It was unreasonable to expect him to respond to each student individually and determine which changes he should consider. Students' ideas needed to be canvassed, surveyed, summarised and prioritised; and presented in a particular way, to a particular audience. An outcome of these discussions was the establishment of what became known as 'authentic tasks'. One task identified by a small group of students, for example, was the purchase of playground equipment. After writing a letter of request to the principal and school council, they were encouraged to submit a proposal for consideration. The students needed to locate and

access information about cost, availability, and design; locate and contact distributors by telephone, fax and letter; meet with company representatives on site to discuss their needs; prepare and submit a rationale statement and budget to the school council, meeting with parent representatives to explain and promote their project; seek quotes from distributors and compare prices and equipment, and so on. The project lasted more than six months and the group was granted $11,000 to purchase the equipment. This is just one example of an authentic task in which students were engaged. Others included organising a school camp, a visit by state basketballer, an Olympics Day sports event, school play, school newsletter and so on. Students surveyed parents and other students to gauge the support for the camp and preference for location; booked accommodation and transport; calculated costs, time and distance; estimated the amount of food needed; prepared letters and consent forms for parents; and so on. Numerous electronic messages were sent to other schools, businesses and the state basketball association. For some children, this was the first time they had used a fax machine, conducted business on the telephone or sent letters on the school letterhead.

The authentic tasks characterised a shift in the nature and position of literacy in the curriculum. Previously, work on the school newsletter had been scheduled as a 'Friday afternoon' activity, for students who had finished set requirements (while story writing, for example, had been seen as a core literacy task). The shift was to regard the school newsletter and other authentic tasks as legitimate literacy work, to be completed within the core program. Organisational tasks that had previously been done by teachers (such as booking a school bus) became part of the work students did in the classroom. Like other learning in the unit, the authentic tasks were designed to give students autonomy, control

and ownership of their use of literacy and to engage them in literacy within a meaningful context. As with the use of language and literacy in the 'real world', students encountered difficulties. For example, when a child calls a bus company to arrange transport for a school excursion she may not be taken seriously and may be asked to put a teacher on the line. Similarly, a manufacturer may not act on a child's verbal request for a product brochure. The students faced these and other barriers. Obstacles or 'failures' in authentic tasks, however, were rich opportunities to explore the use of language in real contexts and discuss issues of language and power. Students had to find ways to overcome these barriers. The solution often involved selecting more appropriate or more powerful ways of communicating. For example, students whose request was not acted on after making telephone contact with a company turned to letter writing, produced on school letterhead. If they contacted the company by telephone again, they worded their request from a position of power, understanding their purchasing power and role as prospective customers. When the group of students producing the unit newsletter failed to print and distribute it on time, many of the announcements were out of date. In discussion with a teacher, they considered the approaches used by commercial newspapers and magazines and found ways of avoiding this problem in the future. Several teachers reported significant changes in students' attitudes and understandings of literacy after the introduction of authentic tasks. The tasks created a learning environment that better suited students and was consistent with the school's aim to empower students, giving them control over their learning.

Shifting paradigms

A shift in paradigm occurred among teachers who embraced the notion of social literacy theory. This change, in turn, brought about a significant shift in the approach to literacy assessment and reporting. Students were using sophisticated language and literacy skills and teachers were interested in how students solved problems associated with the use of language in a social context as well as their facility with the conventions of written and spoken language. They sought to track student progress and achievement in project work and needed new ways of doing so. They considered that work completed in this way more accurately reflected students' literacy skills than responses to isolated tasks on standardised tests. Teachers were concerned that traditional assessment strategies (written tests of spelling, story writing, reading comprehension etc) were not appropriate or effective indicators of development. Professional development provided in the project influenced their view of comprehension tests, for example, when it was shown that a reader could successfully answer questions to a text of non-sense words through a knowledge of linguistic structure (eg Text: 'The wimple morfed the curf'. Question: 'What morfed the curf?' Answer: 'The wimple'). Teachers looked for alternate ways to record the growth evident in students' use of literacy and other learning.

There were several significant issues in assessment that came out of the introduction of authentic literacy tasks. The first was the question of how to assess and track a large number of students working on different tasks at the same time. The second was concern that all students cover 'the basics'. Since the school's involvement in the research project, teachers have been constantly questioning what constitutes 'the basics' of literacy and

numeracy. The third issue was to ensure that assessment informed teaching practice, enabling teachers to target the appropriate students at the appropriate time. Finally, there was concern over how to balance curriculum requirements with real life literacy growth. Teachers struggled with the discrepancy between the understandings demonstrated by some students during face-to-face discussions and their inability to adequately answer test items. Oral assessment, for example, was accepted as a legitimate way of identifying a student's understanding of text (without limiting the definition of text to writing). An Aboriginal student, unable to decode texts sufficiently to demonstrate her understanding, offered a sophisticated interpretation of text and complex understanding of how texts work after a teacher read the text aloud and discussed it with the students. Teachers are faced, however, with the need to report against the Curriculum and Standards Framework II, achieve national benchmarks, and administer state wide standardised tests for students at particular grade levels. Several teachers saw these approaches to assessment and reporting as inconsistent and incompatible with the approach to teaching and learning at the school. The tests provided a narrow view of literacy achievement, but were being used to report overall achievement in this area. The result was that improvement observed in some students was not reflected in the test results.

New approaches to reporting and assessment being developed or adopted by teachers in this school include student self assessment (including learning journals of student reflection); portfolios of annotated work samples; a developmental reading profile; and anecdotal notes documenting student projects, individual conferences and student-teacher group discussions. Self-assessment has become an integral part of the assessment practices in the ALU with students reflecting on their learning before, during and after

learning activities. They are expected to set goals for their own learning, identify their developing skills and reflect on their progress and future learning needs. Teachers use this information to inform their program and identify areas for target or explicit teaching sessions. Although portfolios were introduced in the unit a few years ago, they were not seen as a formal part of assessment and contained student selected 'best work' samples. Since the beginning of 2001, teachers are expected to regularly collect samples of student work across different curriculum areas. The portfolio is now an attempt to reflect the variety of work a student produces and the breadth of learning associated with the authentic tasks. Samples are dated and annotated by the teacher (and, in some cases, the student) with details of the context and areas of achievement highlighted. The school will use portfolios in parent-teacher interviews this year and plans to extend its use to replace the current report. The development of portfolios is part of the teachers' emphasis on students' progress as a developmental continuum, each sample providing a snapshot of achievement at a particular time.

A Developmental Reading Profile has been developed to record student reading achievement based on a developmental continuum (a writing profile is currently being developed). Indicators are arranged in four quadrants reflecting the four roles of the literacy user: text decoder, text user, text participant and text analyst (Freebody and Luke, 1992). The reading profile is intended to make expected learning outcomes explicit to students, help students identify the areas of reading they need to focus on, enable students to make an assessment of their own learning, track individual students as they work on different projects, inform teaching and planning, and identify specific indicators of literacy development with CSF outcomes. Documenting teachers' observations of student

learning and literacy development has become a critical part of the formal assessment process.

Current developments and dilemmas

The teachers at the school continue to develop and refine teaching and assessment practices to be consistent with their philosophy of teaching and learning. The process of change described in this paper is not complete. One of the factors that supports educational change is the ability of teachers and students to evaluate and critically assess what is happening in the classroom and make adjustments to their practices. If teachers are to change the system and not the child they must remain open to changing their practices and not think they have found the solution. The challenge facing teachers in the ALU is the extent to which they must deal with change in response to the directions students take in their learning. They are constantly developing ideas, trailing new practices, adjusting old practices and looking for ways of improving their programs. Some changes are made in response to things not working; others are an attempt to develop those practices that seem to be working. Student needs and assessment data lead to further change in teaching and learning activity. New ideas and resources, from within and outside the school, provide another impetus for change.

Teachers are still grappling with pedagogical and organisational issues such as student engagement, and judging work standards and output. While a major benefit of authentic learning is student engagement, authentic tasks give increased freedom to students, some of whom struggle to work independently. Despite efforts to prepare students for the independent learning required of them in the ALU, some students struggle to work

without teacher direction. Teachers are then faced with the dilemma of deciding how much control to take back. Teachers may intervene to bring students back onto task because of the pressure of parent perception and the need to report on specific learning outcomes. Some teachers believe that students will have richer learning experiences if they have to face the consequences of their actions and solve problems for themselves. When teachers changed the teaching and learning paradigm, they also had to re-evaluate their expectations of students. The amount of work a student is expected to complete under teacher direction is different from the work generated when a student directs her own learning. The challenge for teachers is to judge when lack of output is due to positive learning behaviours or time-wasting behaviours. Despite the recognition of multi-literacies, written evidence still dominates the assessment of student learning.

Reference

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